

Crisis for Whom? Reconsidering Historical Models of Ancient Southwest Asia

Roland Boer

Published as: 2016 ‘谁之危机？—对古代西南亚历史范型的再思考

(Crisis for Whom? Reconsidering Historical Models of Ancient Southwest Asia)’. 圣经文学研究 (*Journal for the Study of Biblical Literature*) 12: 45-61. Translated into Chinese by He Guijian.

Ever since Herodotus, students of ancient Southwest Asia have understood its history in terms of a sequence of fluorescence and darkening, of the rise and collapse of empires.¹ One despot after another attempted for a while the phallic-like extension of his powers, penetrating his neighbors and holding them under his seminal sway, only to find that the rush of blood does not last forever. The periods in between the fall of one empire and the rise of another are thereby regarded as times of “crisis.” To take a few examples: the Sumerian expansion, running through from the revolution of Uruk to the elaborate and rather extraordinary organizational achievements of “The Kingdom of Sumer and Akkad” (Ur III), eventually collapses around 2000 BCE, due to a variety of causes. Later, in the sixteenth century a “dark

¹ Two recent examples include Marc van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000-323 BC*, 2 ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007); Norman Yoffee, *Myths of the Archaic State: Evolution of the Earliest Cities, States, and Civilizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). This statist approach persists in Yoffee's neo-evolutionary approach, which attempts to describe the emergence and collapse of states from the perspective of ordinary people.

age” descends upon ancient Southwest Asia, and then later again another such age at the close of the second millennium BCE – when the Hittites’ modest achievements also collapse, as does the Creto-Mycenaean sphere at about the same time in the thirteenth century. By the first millennium it is the turn of the Neo-Assyrians, Neo-Babylonians, and then the Persians, who rose and fell with stunning alacrity. At this point, it is usual to produce a simple timeline to illustrate the pattern:

Uruk	Akkad	Ur III	Old Assyria & Babylon	Neo-Assyria, Neo-Babylon, Persia (Israel) ²	
4000	3000	2000	1000	0	

However, this approach has two assumptions that need to be challenged: stability is the norm and collapse or crisis is the exception; crisis is a disaster for everyone, no matter whether monarch or peasant, ruling class or laborers. The two assumptions are related, with the first being logically prior to the second; so, in questioning them, I take them in turn.

² I have added Israel here, since it is both one of my areas of erstwhile specialty and the focus of much continued research. The parentheses indicate in shorthand that Israel was, in its wider context, a belated arrival on the scene and part of the very marginal zone of the southern Levant in terms of economics, politics and culture. Igor M. Diakonoff, "Main Features of the Economy in the Monarchies of Ancient Western Asia," in *Troisième conférence internationale d'histoire économique: The Ancient Empires and the Economy*, ed. Moses I. Finley, 13-32 (Paris: Mouton, 1969), 29; John David Hawkins, "The Neo-Hittite States in Syria and Anatolia," in *Cambridge Ancient History*, ed. John Boardman, et al., vol. 3: 1, 372-441 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 425; Mario Liverani, *Israel's History and the History of Israel*, trans. Chiara Peri and Philip Davies (London: Equinox, 2005), 6, 9-10; Ianir Milevski, *Early Bronze Age Goods Exchange in the Southern Levant: A Marxist Perspective* (London: Equinox, 2011), 27.

The Norm of “Crisis”

The disappearance and rise of social organisms, the formation and breakdown of great political entities, the incursions by peoples of the historical periphery into areas where historical progress was centered, cannot be regarded as deviations from the norm or anomalies. For the societies of the Ancient East, all this was the norm, the rule.³

Rather than being an anomaly which requires explanation, crisis was the norm in the socio-economic life of ancient Southwest Asia. The privilege of being an anomaly belongs to stability: periods of economic and political stability become anomalies or exceptions. These periods entail sustained effort to stabilize crises in order to gain some continuity. This point is primarily theoretical, since the vast bulk of material available for assessing that periods comes from the ruling classes. In a classic fashion, such classes assume that their perspective is everyone's perspective, thereby universalizing the distinct particularity of their situations.

The clearest formulation of this position concerning the normative status of crisis comes from Alain Lipietz:

First, we consider society and, within society, economic activities, to be a network of social relations. That is, we do not say that there are individuals who from time to time connect

³ Iu. I. Semenov, "The Theory of Socioeconomic Systems and the Process of World History," *Soviet Anthropology and Archeology* 16, no. 1 (1977): 21.

with each other and engage in exchanges, but we consider that exchange is itself a social relation, of a very particular sort.

A second major thesis is that each of these social relations is *contradictory*, and therefore it is not easy to live within this network of social relations ... If social relations are contradictory in this way, the usual situation should be a crisis. In other words, crisis is the normal, natural state and non-crisis is a rather chance event.⁴

To begin with, social relations are primary, or rather, determinative. One cannot speak of exchange, for instance, without describing it in terms of social relations. The polemical edge of this argument – recovering Polanyi⁵ – is that even in capitalism, pure market-oriented relations do not exist, let alone in precapitalist economies: “all social relations frame the world in which economic activities are carried on.”⁶ Or as Boyer and Saillard observe, an individual reduced to pure economic rationality – the infamous *homo economicus* – would simply be unable to function at the simplest level; instead, our economic arrangements “arise from the

⁴ Alain Lipietz, "The Regulation School: An Interview with Alain Lipietz," (2003), <http://lipietz.net/spip.php?article750>. Lipietz is a prominent economist with the *régulation* school. It is not my task here to delve into the inner workings of that school and its distinct insights, but see the excellent surveys by Robert Boyer and Yves Saillard, eds., *Régulation Theory: The State of the Art* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1995]); Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum, *Beyond the Regulation Approach: Putting Capitalist Economies in their Place* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2006), 13-57.

⁵ Karl Polanyi, Conrad M. Arensberg, and Harry W. Pearson, "The Place of Economies in Societies," in *Trade and Market in the Early Empires: Economies in History and Theory*, ed. Karl Polanyi, Conrad M. Arensberg, and Harry W. Pearson, 239-42 (New York: Free Press, 1957).

⁶ Lipietz, "The Regulation School: An Interview with Alain Lipietz". See also Jessop and Sum, *Beyond the Regulation Approach: Putting Capitalist Economies in their Place*, 6-8. For a study of biblical economics that makes a similar point, see Ronald Simkins, "Patronage and the Political Economy of Ancient Israel," *Semeia* 87(1999): 123-24. And for ancient Southwest Asia, see Michael Jursa, "Debts and Indebtedness in the Neo-Babylonian Period: Evidence from Institutional Archives," in *Debt and Economic Renewal in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Michael Hudson and Marc van de Mieroop, 197-220 (Bethesda: CDL, 2002), 203.

construction and maintenance of a social bond.”⁷ That is, structural forms and economic practices are inescapably “embedded” in specific institutions and cultural assumptions that change over time and place, and even these institutions and assumptions have their own social dynamics.⁸ Thus, in capitalism there is no such thing as an autonomous market, somehow carrying on a life of its own and into which the state “intervenes” from time to time. Even more, in the ancient world we do not have some forms of exchange that are market oriented and some that are “embedded,” as the Polanyi-and-Malinowski-derived debates would have it, for pure market relations do not exist.

The second point is more intriguing. Are all economies concerned with the management of crisis? In the case of ancient Southwest Asia this appears to be the case, especially the strikingly frequent collapse and rise of “big kingdoms” and “little kingdoms” over its long history.⁹ Further, the long periods without any clear centralized political and economic activity are clearly “crises.” Too often are such collapses and crises analyzed in political terms, with relatively scant attention given to their economic dynamics; or they may be attributed to external causes, such as

⁷ Robert Boyer and Yves Saillard, “A Summary of *Régulation* Theory,” in *Regulation Theory: The State of the Art*, ed. Robert Boyer and Yves Saillard, 36-44 (London: Routledge, 2002 [1995]), 44.

⁸ The connections with institutional economics are worth noting here. Maurice Baslé, “Acknowledged and Unacknowledged Institutional Antecedents of *Régulation* Theory,” in *Regulation Theory: The State of the Art*, ed. Robert Boyer and Yves Saillard, 21-27 (London: Routledge, 2002 [1995]); Marie-Claire Villeval, “*Régulation* Theory Among Theories of Institutions,” *ibid.*, 291-98.

⁹ I follow Liverani in using such terms, since these are what the ancient texts themselves use. Liverani, *Israel's History and the History of Israel*, 7.

marauding hill tribes, salinization of the soil, and so forth. I suggest that such crises were primarily economic in causation and form. In that light, it is useful to distinguish between four different types of crisis: exogenous, endogenous, structural and ultimate.¹⁰

The first type is due to external shocks and forces. Those who see economic equilibrium as the norm regard all crises as exogenous, disrupting the calm stability of the system. By contrast, if the system in question is focused on managing crisis, then exogenous crises, no matter how dire, do not in and of themselves threaten the dominant economic regime. Only in the case of a deep structural crisis (the third type) do exogenous threats contribute to the problems. Changes in the climate (rainfall and temperature patterns), foreign invasions, especially by “nomadic” and “tribal” groups, or indeed the ever-popular Habiru in the Levant and elsewhere, are successful when a system itself is in deep crisis.

Second, endogenous or internal crises appear in a cyclical form. These are not in themselves threatening, since they are endemic and perform a useful function in managing the extremes of the economic system. The best example here is the spasmodic ancient Southwest Asian practice of the amelioration of some debts, usually at the beginning of a new potentate’s reign. These functioned as responses to

¹⁰ Boyer and Saillard, "A Summary of *Régulation Theory*," 41-42; Frédéric Lordon, "Formalising Regulationist Dynamics and Crises," in *Regulation Theory: The State of the Art*, ed. Robert Boyer and Yves Saillard, 174-80 (London: Routledge, 2002 [1995]); Robert Boyer, *The Regulation School: A Critical Introduction*, trans. Craig Charney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 48-60.

cyclical crises that needed to be managed in order to sustain the system in question. Usually promulgated at the beginning of a new despot's reign, they typically sought not to abolish debts but to ameliorate them to some extent or to shift those trapped in debt labor from one type of dependency and back to another.¹¹

The third type of crisis is structural, in which the internal, socially-determined tensions that enabled the system to rise to dominance now threaten to tear it apart. No longer can the system recover due to its internal dynamics, so a thorough reconfiguration is required. The most significant example of such a shift is at the turn of the first millennium BCE, when new economic regimes arose in ancient Southwest Asia in order to deal with the impossible tensions of what had gone before. Until the centuries long economic crisis of the late second millennium BCE, the constitutive economic contradiction was between palatine estates and the agricultural labor of village communities.¹² The basic purpose of the estates was the supply of "goods for a minority,"¹³ that is, to supply those who were not gainfully

¹¹ As the decree of Lipit-Ishtar (1934-24) makes clear, the *mīšarum* had the purpose of putting "them into their previous status" (following the translation of Johannes M. Renger, "Royal Edicts of the Old Babylonian Period - Structural Background," in *Debt and Economic Renewal in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Michael Hudson and Marc van de Mieroop, 139-62 (Bethesda: CDL, 2002), 145.) If people had become too indebted to landlord-usurers, then they were moved back to palatine dependence; if they were too heavily tied to palace officials, their dependence was returned to the temple. So we find that the decree was often restricted to certain types of debt, especially those concerning labor, or they focused on a specific target, such as landlord-usurers, or even rapacious palace officials. The reason was that the patterns of debt-slavery tended to lock laborers into certain types of indentured labor and thereby render them unavailable for other types, especially the corvée that the state needed for its building projects or for peak periods such as sowing and harvest.

¹² I distill this insight from the important but neglected work of Igor M. Diakonoff, "The Structure of Near Eastern Society before the Middle of the Second Millennium B.C.," *Oikumene* 3(1982); Igor M. Diakonoff, *The Paths of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 21-55.

¹³ Diakonoff, *The Paths of History* 36.

employed – priests, monarchs, and their perpetual dinner guests – with food, alcohol, and textiles. Estates were therefore established in the vicinity of temples and then ruling centers, administered either directly by functionaries or by tenure to landlords. Those who labored on them were indentured permanently or temporarily (corvée, conquest, and debt-labor). Given the perpetual labor shortage, the estates constantly sought to draw more laborers from the village communities, with little concern for the continued viability of the latter. Here is the inherent tension and source of perpetual crises of the palatine estate system: the village communities used a tried and tested mode of subsistence-survival agriculture. It deployed optimal rather than maximal use of land, diversification, putting aside small surpluses for lean years, and was focused on needing little rather than wanting much. At times, such village communities were under the wavering sway of despots, and at times they were not. But the ruling classes had little incentive to foster such village communities, not only because intermittent taxation was limited, but also because such communities contained the labor sorely needed on the estates. So the palatine estates sought by any means available to extract more and more labor from those communities. Obviously, such a system is inherently unstable, and the regularity of collapses of palatine systems should be no surprise. Yet, eventually, such structural instability became too much and the long period of crisis in the late

second millennium marks the end of the dominance of palatine estates.¹⁴ When new powers arose in the first millennium, they began to develop a rather different economic regime based on tribute and exchange. I cannot go into the detail of this form here, suffice to point out that tribute and exchange were intimately linked, serving to supply in a relatively more efficient manner the increasing needs of the ruling class and its hangers-on, as well as the larger armies required to enforce such a system. This new economic regime may have enabled the large empires of the Neo-Assyrians, Neo-Babylonians and the Persians, but their own structural instability is signaled by the alacrity with which they too collapsed.

Ultimately, this type of crisis is merely the warm-up for the crisis of modes of production, when the whole economic structure can no longer be sustained, when no new forms can be constructed within the existing confines. Usually drawn out, deeply disruptive, and violent, the crisis of mode of production comprises the most fundamental reconfiguration. The moment of such a transition to a new mode of production in the ancient world was from the economic system of palatine estates and tribute-exchange (what I have elsewhere called the sacred economy) to the slave-based mode of the Greeks and Romans.

¹⁴ Mario Liverani, "The Collapse of the Near Eastern Regional System at the End of the Bronze Age: The Case of Syria," in *Centre and Periphery in the Ancient World*, ed. Michael J. Rowlands, Mogens Trolle Larsen, and Kristian Kristiansen, 66-73 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Crisis for Whom?

Village life thrived on its relative isolation from the wider universe of the nation state, and indeed from urban life in general.¹⁵

I have thus far emphasized the normativity of crises and provided an overview of the types of crisis for the economies of ancient Southwest Asia. But the crucial question remains: crisis for whom? Let me approach an answer in terms of the related category of “collapse.” From the perspective of the ruling class, the end of the power of a little or big kingdom is indeed a collapse and the ensuing period is a prolonged time of crisis.¹⁶ The sources of wealth have been removed, the palaces and temples destroyed, the estate system or patterns of tribute and exchange have been dismantled, and power has been lost. In these contexts, the archaeological record begins to show signs of “crisis architecture,” “termination rituals,” and “calamity feasts,” in which the desperate rulers use up their last reserves to appease furious gods.¹⁷ At times, dispossessed elites do indeed produce remarkable works – the collection of texts in the Hebrew Bible is an excellent example.

¹⁵ Douglas A. Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel*, Library of Ancient Israel (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 117.

¹⁶ As an example of such a perspective in relation to the “collapse” around 1200 BCE, see Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000-323 BC*, 191-206; Yoffee, *Myths of the Archaic State: Evolution of the Earliest Cities, States, and Civilizations*, 131-60.

¹⁷ For example, see the study of Late Bronze Age Hazor, where such features appear just prior to abandonment and final destruction of the site. Nimrod Marom and Sharon Zuckerman, “Applying On-Site Analysis of Faunal Assemblages from Domestic Contexts: A Case Study from the Lower City of Hazor,” in *Household Archaeology in*

Yet, from the perspective of the village communities, of the subsistence and estate laborers, of socially determining clan households, a “collapse” actually means a blessed relief from various means of extraction and exploitation.¹⁸ One can hardly expect the peasants, laborers, and common people to sit back and wait for such much-desired collapses to happen. From the Habiru through to archaeological signals of urban destruction by the town’s own exploited class, they were more than keen to hasten the demise.¹⁹ Indeed, in the Amarna Letters the Habiru become ever stronger and threaten town after town, making for heart-warming reading.²⁰ As Rib-Hadda put it when facing revolt, “I am afraid the peasantry will strike me down.”²¹ Semi-nomadic pastoralists too were ready to join in, for throughout Mesopotamian history their annual and usually “peaceful” migration “could be transformed into aggressive campaigns if the power of the centralized state was weak.”²² The outcome

Ancient Israel and Beyond, ed. Assaf Yasur-Landau, Jennie R. Ebeling, and Laura B. Mazow, 37-54 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 51-53.

¹⁸ See further Gale A. Yee, "Recovering Marginalized Groups in Ancient Israel: Methodological Considerations," in *To Break Every Yoke: Essays in Honor of Marvin L. Chaney*, ed. Robert B. Coote and Norman K. Gottwald, 10-27 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 13-15. On peasant movements more generally, see Eric R. Wolf, *Peasants* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 106-9; James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

¹⁹ For examples of such archaeological materials at Late Bronze Age Hazor, especially in the burning of monumental structures in the lower city and on the “acropolis,” aimed at the symbols and reality of ruling class power, see Marom and Zuckerman, "Applying On-Site Analysis of Faunal Assemblages from Domestic Contexts: A Case Study from the Lower City of Hazor," 51-53.

²⁰ See EA 67-138, 144, 148, 179, 185-86, 189, 195, 197, 207, 215, 243, 246, 254, 271-74, 286-90, 298-99, 305, 307, 313, 318, 366. William L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 137-223, 230-31, 235, 262, 265-68, 269-70, 273, 274-75, 280, 283-84, 297-98, 300, 307-8, 317-19, 326-34, 340-41, 343, 345, 346-47, 349, 364.

²¹ EA 77. Moran, *The Amarna Letters*, 148.

²² Nelly V. Kozyreva, "The Old Babylonian Period of Mesopotamian History," in *Early Antiquity*, ed. Igor M. Diakonoff and Philip L. Kohl, 98-123 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 99. Of course, this is complicated by an internal tension when these semi-nomadic pastoralists settle down in an area where they have assisted in the demise of a local potentate. At times they establish their own states and become somewhat oppressive as a result, replicating in part

was highly desirable: no longer do the young men and women have to work periodically or permanently on the palatine estates; no longer does the despised usurer-merchant-tax-collector call with his thugs to collect a debt-slave or take a portion of the herd or some of the girls for his sexual usage; no longer do the temple and palace suck away the foodstuffs needed for subsistence-survival. I would suggest that the mythical accounts of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) and Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18-19) embody such a perspective in their own way, as do the warnings of 1 Samuel 8, the parable of the bramble in Judges 9:8-15, the long account of the failings of the kings of Israel and Judah and the eventual punishment in 1-2 Kings, and the account of the resistance by the “people of the land” and myriad other groups in Ezra-Nehemiah to the imposition of an imperial regime of plunder with the return of the exiles.²³ It is telling that during such times the records of loans, debts, and the obligatory labor tied in with loans, disappear.²⁴ This is not due to some “dark age,” lacking civilization, but rather to systemic peasant resistance and agency: one of the first acts of those eager to see the demise of their overlords is to tear up – or in this case, smash – the loan documents. These periods were not only

the system of the vanquished. So it was after the collapse of Ur III in the early second millennium, with the Haneans based in Terqa, the Yamutbala tribe in Larsa, and the Amnanu tribe in Babylon. Earlier, in the late third millennium, the Qutians did much the same after they dispatched the Sargonids of Akkade.

²³ On the class dimensions of the resistance in Ezra-Nehemiah, see Roland Boer, “No Road: On the Absence of Feminist Criticism of Ezra-Nehemiah,” in *Her Master's Tools: Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse*, ed. Vander Stichele Caroline and Todd Penner, 233-52 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005).

²⁴ Marc van de Mieroop, “A History of Near Eastern Debt?,” in *Debt and Economic Renewal in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Michael Hudson and Marc van de Mieroop, 59-94 (Bethesda: CDL, 2002), 81.

ones of ruralization and the spread of villages, such as the eightfold increase in villages in the southern Levant between 1200 and 1000 BCE, or whenever cities and their political power declined,²⁵ but also ones of innovation: horse and chariot in the sixteenth century “dark age,” for instance, or the spread of iron technology at the end of the second millennium.

These differing class perspectives may be illustrated by two examples. The first comes from the lament in the *Erra Epic*, written from a Babylonian context and concerned with the events from 1200 BCE onwards. I suggest we should read this not as a lament of general chaos and collapse, but specifically as a lament of a ruling class with nowhere to hide, much like the biblical book of Lamentations:

He who did not die in battle, will die in the epidemic

He who did not die in the epidemic, the enemy will rob him

He whom the enemy has not robbed, the thief will thrash him

He whom the thief did not thrash, the king's weapon will overcome him

He whom the king's weapon did not overcome, the prince will kill him

He whom the prince did not kill, the storm god will wash away

²⁵ Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel*, 118-19, 159-60; Israel Finkelstein, "The Emergence of Israel: A Phase in the Cyclic History of Canaan in the Third and Second Millennia BCE," in *From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeology and Historical Aspects of Early Israel*, ed. Israel Finkelstein and Nadav Na'aman, 150-78 (Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1994).

He whom the storm god did not wash away, the sun god will carry him away

He who has left for the countryside, the wind will sweep him away

He who has entered his own house, a demon will strike him

He who climbed up a high place, will die of thirst

He who went down to a low place, will die in the waters

You have destroyed high and low place alike!²⁶

A second example of the different perspectives on “crisis” may be found in interpretations of the slogan in Judges 17:6: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” The textual setting suggests that the overarching editorial framework is a negative one: a man called Micah requests a silversmith to construct an “idol” (*pesel*) from a portion of the silver he had recovered for his mother. He puts the resultant image in a shrine he has made, adds an ephod and teraphim and makes one of his sons a priest. Later, a passing Levite is invited to become priest, only to join a larger crowd of marauders from the tribe of Dan who also take the image and associated shrine-ware. If we assume the ban on images in the Second Commandment, as well as the various instances of supposed “lawlessness” that follow, this story seems to be a negative one, giving voice to ruling

²⁶ Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000-323 BC*, 199. Compare Amos 5:19.

class concerns of chaos and crisis, expressed through the pens of the scribal subclass.

By contrast, it may also be read as a slogan of freedom. As David Jobling pointed out some time ago, the statement that there was no king (see also Judges 18:1; 19:1; 21:25; 1 Kings 22:17; 2 Chronicles 18:16) and that “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” is an almost utopian image, a claim and a desire for a society without oppression from some petty potentate seeking to squeeze the peasants once again. I suggest that this slogan applies very well to the perspective of those who were all too pleased to see the crisis and collapse of the sundry overlords and their seedy hangers-on. Indeed, the text from Judges echoes a rallying-call from one of the Habiru leaders, ‘Abdi-Aširta:

Let us drive out the mayors from the country that the entire country be joined to the ‘Apiru, ... to the entire country. Then will (our) sons and daughters be at peace forever. Should even so the king come out, the entire country will be against him and what will he do to us?²⁷

In this light, when I write that crisis was the norm and that economic “stability” was the exception, I am still using the terminology of the ruling class, of those that left most of the records and who felt that world would collapse without

²⁷ EA 74. Moran, *The Amarna Letters*, 143. See also Igor M. Diakonoff, "Syria, Phoenicia, and Palestine in the Third and Second Millennia B.C.," in *Early Antiquity*, ed. Igor M. Diakonoff and Philip L. Kohl, 286-308 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 295; Liverani, *Israel's History and the History of Israel*, 27-28.

them. To be sure, I am still one remove from the assumption that stability is the norm and crisis the exception, but I have not yet gone far enough. That final step requires a more substantial reversal, in which crisis actually becomes stability, imbalance becomes balance, and vice versa.²⁸

Thus, the centuries-long periods of “crisis,” whether in the third millennium BCE, in the “dark age” of sixteenth and early fifteenth centuries, and then at the turn of the first millennium, are actually the most stable of all, for now the patterns of allocation and reallocation of labor, land and produce become dominant, now the preferred modes of the sacred come to the fore, now subsistence-survival is less threatened, now the kinship-household may concentrate on what it does best rather than having to deal with continuous external threats.²⁹ It is truly a revolution, but not in the way it is usually understood – a revolution from the palatine system to the

²⁸ This ambivalence of class perspective also shows up in the way archaeologists interpret the material remains in crucial periods. For instance, in the period of Late Bronze Age “decline”, some see evidence of increasing “poverty,” in both measures of wealth and in artistic skill; by contrast, others find signs of great wealth and artistic skill. Of course, the questions left begging here are many. Of which classes do they speak? Whose perspective do they voice? Is not the tension between extreme wealth and extreme poverty the sign of excessive exploitation? See Nava Panitz-Cohen, “A Tale of Two Houses: The Role of Pottery in Reconstructing Household Wealth and Composition,” in *Household Archaeology in Ancient Israel and Beyond*, ed. Assaf Yasur-Landau, Jennie R. Ebeling, and Laura B. Mazow, 85-105 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 99.

²⁹ This revalorization is implicit in Diamond’s description of the greater potential for “collapse” of economic systems dominated by an extractive ruling class: “A series of good years, with adequate rainfall or with sufficiently shallow groundwater, may result in population growth, resulting in turn in society becoming increasingly complex and interdependent and no longer locally self-sufficient. Such a society then can no longer cope with, and rebuild itself after, a series of bad years that a less populous, less interdependent, more self-sufficient society had previously been able to cope with.” Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking, 2005), 143.

imperial regimes of plunder that followed in the first millennium BCE.³⁰ Instead, the revolution is in terms of the tried economic regime of subsistence-survival, a proper *re*-volution that came back into its own during such periods of what may now be called stability. With the marginal surpluses and often the basic needs of subsistence survival no longer appropriated by temple, palace, or marauding army, they can be used for what they were primarily intended: to see a community through a lean year or two. Customary law and the myriad expectations of the kinship household no longer find it necessary to compete with the codified laws of an aspiring emperor. Above all, the intimate practice of the sacred, with cult corners and the inescapable presence of imps and spirits and demons, dominates again, while the temple on the hill lies in ruins. In other words, rural life in village communities was the form of central constitutive resistance to which the powers had constantly to respond, especially so with their imperial armies.³¹

³⁰ Mario Liverani, "Land Tenure and Inheritance in the Ancient Near East: The Interaction between 'Palace' and 'Family' Sectors," in *Land Tenure and Social Transformation in the Middle East*, ed. T. Khalidi, 33-44 (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1984), 34.

³¹ Igor M. Diakonoff, "The Rural Community in the Ancient Near East," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 18, no. 2 (1975): 123; Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel*, 120. The "murmuring" stories in the wilderness wanderings may give expression to such constitutive resistance (Numbers 11-12, 16, 20, and so on).

Conclusion: Causes of Stability

Le premier point est que la communauté de village existe encore comme élément essentiel d'une structure économique (et politique).³²

Nonetheless, before this proposal is misread as some proto-anarchist advocacy of local communal life, I would like to close by indicating more systematically the causes of this stability during what have so often been called periods of "crisis." Occasionally, I have referred to an economic regime of subsistence-survival, which returned to its preferred modes of operating whenever big or little kingdoms collapsed and when some time elapsed before another arose. But let me draw together the various hints earlier in this text and outline what such an economic regime looked like.

Based in village communities, subsistence-revival deployed diverse and versatile mechanisms of animal husbandry (with 2:1 ratios of sheep and goats) and crop growing.³³ Above all, those methods were socially determined by what Soviet-era Russian scholars called the extended-family household commune or village-

³² Mario Liverani, "Communautés de village et palais royal dans la Syrie du II^e millénaire," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, no. 18 (1975): 163-64.

³³ Aharon Sasson, *Animal Husbandry in Ancient Israel: A Zooarchaeological Perspective on Livestock Exploitation, Herd Management and Economic Strategies* (London: Equinox, 2010); Mette Marie Hald, *A Thousand Years of Farming: Late Chalcolithic Agricultural Practices at Tell Brak in Northern Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2008), 44-121; Frank Hole, "Middle Khabur Settlement and Agriculture in the Ninevite 5 Period," *Bulletin of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* 21(1991).

commune,³⁴ and what Western scholars have dubbed *musha'* farming.³⁵ It designates a strikingly persistent approach to subsistence agriculture, largely because it has been tried and tested. Typically, farmers lived in a village cluster, with a population of 75-150 and coterminous with the clan, although smaller settlements also had less than 75.³⁶ From here, farmers would go out to the fields to work, as archaeological investigation of such settlements and their pathways indicates.³⁷ But those fields were not held in perpetual possession by the farmers. Instead, non-contiguous strips of land were allocated to each household for cultivation. In the Bible, this is the *helqat haššādeh* of Genesis 33:19-20; Ruth 4:3, 2 Samuel 14:30-31, 2 Kings 9:21, 25, Jeremiah 12:10 and Amos 4:7. These were social units of measurements rather than clear demarcations of land for the purpose of ownership. They would usually be of considerable length (up to one kilometer, or along the twisting path of a terrace in

³⁴ Igor M. Diakonoff, "The Commune in the Ancient East as Treated in the Works of Soviet Researchers," in *Introduction to Soviet Ethnography, Volume II*, ed. Stephen P. Dunn and Ethel Dunn, 519-48 (Berkeley: Highgate Road Social Science Research Station, 1974); Diakonoff, "The Rural Community in the Ancient Near East; Diakonoff, "The Structure of Near Eastern Society before the Middle of the Second Millennium B.C.," 35; Diakonoff, "General Outline of the First Period of the History of the Ancient World and the Problem of the Ways of Development," 34-35; Ninel B. Jankowska, "Extended Family Commune and Civil Self-Government in the Fifteenth-Fourteenth Century B.C.," in *Ancient Mesopotamia: Socio-Economic History. A Collection of Studies by Soviet Scholars*, ed. Igor M. Diakonoff, 235-52 (Moscow: "Nauka" Publishing House, 1969); Ninel B. Jankowska, "Asshur, Mitanni, and Arrapkhe," in *Early Antiquity*, ed. Igor M. Diakonoff and Philip L. Kohl, 228-60 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 253; Roger P. Bartlett, ed. *Land Commune and Peasant Community in Russia: Communal Forms in Imperial and Early Soviet Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990).

³⁵ Tony Wilkinson, *Archaeological Landscapes of the Near East* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003); Tony Wilkinson, "The Tell: Social Archaeology and Territorial Space," in *Development of Pre-State Communities in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Dianne Bolger and Louise C. Maguire, 55-62 (Oxford: Oxbow, 2010); Philippe Guillaume, *Land, Credit and Crisis: Agrarian Finance in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 28-42.

³⁶ Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel*, 122-23.

³⁷ Wilkinson, "The Tell: Social Archaeology and Territorial Space," 56-57; Tony Wilkinson, "The Structure and Dynamics of Dry Farming States in Upper Mesopotamia," *Current Anthropology* 35, no. 1 (1994); J.J. Casana, "Structural Transformations in Settlement Systems of the Northern Levant," *American Journal of Archaeology* 112(2007).

areas such as the Judean highlands), but with a width of a few furrows. At set times, usually annually or biannually, those strips were reallocated on the basis of need, fertility, labor power and so on. The means for such reallocation varied, whether by lot, by all the adult males, a council of elders, or perhaps a village headman. Needless to say, the process involved all manner of unwritten rules and much argument, but the outcome was that the strips were reallocated.

Collective activity was inescapable, within the village and between villages that were 2-4 kilometers apart, for the individual was helpless in the face of natural and social disaster, needing cooperation and reciprocal aid in order to survive.³⁸ Thus, kinship, both highly flexible and embodied in the patriarchal household, was crucial. A further factor was the advantage of combined labor, whether with plough teams, sowing or harvesting. Finally, the close-knit village-commune, with its headman and council of elders, was also advantageous for protection and defense against raiders. We may, following Roberts, describe these three factors as the communality of assent, of economizing and of enforcement.³⁹

Obviously, this economic regime, which is based on the allocation and reallocation of labor, land and produce, has little time for impositions from those that seek to extract from them, whether the crude forms of plunder or its more

³⁸ Igor M. Diakonoff, "Slaves, Helots and Serfs in Early Antiquity," in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft im alten Vorderasien*, ed. János Harmatta and Geörgy Komoróczy, 45-78 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1976), 66; David C. Hopkins, *The Highlands of Canaan: Agricultural Life in the Early Highlands* (Sheffield: Almond, 1985), 256.

³⁹ Brian Roberts, *Landscapes of Settlement: Prehistory to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1996), 35-37.

polite forms (tax and tribute). Given half a chance, the agents of subsistence-survival would revert to their preferred mode of social and economic existence. This is the core economic regime of what is often called “crisis” in studies of ancient Southwest Asia. Instead, as I have argued, it constitutes a basis for significant stability once freed from external pressures. The “collapses” and “crises” of the big and little kingdoms were clearly not crises for these subsistence-survival village communities.

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